

DAEDALUS

MYTH AND MYTHMAKING

Jerome S. Bruner
Joseph Campbell
Richard M. Dorson
Mircea Eliade
Clyde Kluckhohn
Harry Levin
Andrew Lytle
Marshall McLuhan
Henry A. Murray
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CONTENTS

- 211 INTRODUCTION TO THE ISSUE "MYTH AND MYTHMAKING,"
by Henry A. Murray
- 223 SOME MEANINGS OF MYTH, *by Harry Levin*
- 232 THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF MYTHOLOGY, *by Joseph
Campbell*
- 255 THE YEARNING FOR PARADISE IN PRIMITIVE TRADITION, *by
Mircea Eliade*
- 268 RECURRENT THEMES IN MYTHS AND MYTHMAKING, *by Clyde
Kluckhohn*
- 280 THEORIES OF MYTH AND THE FOLKLORIST, *by Richard M.
Dorson*
- 291 THE THREE ROMES: THE MIGRATION OF AN IDEOLOGY AND
THE MAKING OF AN AUTOCRAT, *by Robert Lee Wolff*
- 312 WORLD INTERPRETATION AND SELF-INTERPRETATION: SOME
BASIC PATTERNS, *by Ernst Topitsch*
- 326 THE WORKING NOVELIST AND THE MYTHMAKING PROCESS,
by Andrew Lytle
- 339 MYTH AND MASS MEDIA, *by Marshall McLuhan*
- 349 MYTH AND IDENTITY, *by Jerome S. Bruner*

TEXTS AND MOTIFS

- 359 MARK SCHORER, "THE NECESSITY OF MYTH"

continued

363	GEORGES SOREL, "REFLECTIONS ON VIOLENCE"
369	THOMAS MANN, "DOCTOR FAUSTUS"
374	THOMAS MANN, "FREUD AND THE FUTURE"
379	NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS



SPRING 1959

ISSUED AS VOL. 88, No. 2, OF THE PROCEEDINGS OF
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Introduction to the Issue “Myth and Mythmaking”

HENRY A. MURRAY

THIS VARIED ASSEMBLAGE of important papers constitutes, we hope, the generative first phase of a continuing symposium.*

To receive essays as solid as these about a topic as fluid as myth is certainly a greater boon than any editor, host or guest, can rationally expect. Such excess of fortune makes it easier for me, as the link between *Dædalus* and the contributors to this symposium, to acknowledge dutifully at the outset that the offerings, solicited and unsolicited, of our contributors—scholarly, enlightened, and suggestive as these surely are—are distributed for the most part over a wider range of discourse than originally suggested by the organizers of the symposium. This is itself significant, and merits discussion. Moreover, it is probable that those who may be interested in subsequent phases of this enterprise will be advantaged by a little knowledge regarding not only the intentions of the authors of the project, but also the different interests and antipathies, doubts and judgments of those of us who were primarily responsible for the divergence from the chosen beam of thought.

The initial challenge leading to this publication was the concern expressed by the President of the Academy, Mr. John E. Burchard, as to the apparent absence in the West of a “basically coherent world view” shared by the majority of rational men in diverse fields of learning. Was not “an academy of all the arts and sciences” obligated “in the middle of this explosive century to explore more effective means of communication” between disciplines with different perspectives relevant to a world view?

A small group was brought together to consider Mr. Burchard’s challenge. Eventually, after much thought and talk, myth—the

* The Academy is grateful to Mr. John W. Gardner, President of the Carnegie Corporation, for a generous grant calculated to cover the expenses not only of the preliminary closed symposium that took place at the House of the Academy on 23 and 24 May 1958, but also of a larger and more public conference on Myth to be held in the fall of 1959 or later.

iconography of a world view, finished or in the making—was chosen as a topic that might invite and kindle celebrations among several varieties of specialists both in the arts and in the sciences. The vision was that of shedding rays of light, a very few, upon the grievous disorders and dilemmas of our time, rays that would pierce the surface clash of words and deeds and so to some extent expose their mythological, or spiritual, determinants.*

Although, for good reasons, myth was not explicitly defined, enough of what the organizers of the symposium had in mind could be inferred from such provisional early questions as the following (slightly revised for present purposes): The values on which leaders base decisions of great social import, are they in essence myths? And, if so, are such myths of unconscious and unreasoned origin? What is the character of those myths that may be said to have supported culture in America? In what ways have they been harmful or beneficent? Can we say why one myth is likely to be effective in promoting the health of a society and why another is likely to be lethal? What are the sources of the currently prevailing myths? What role, if any, does the rational mind play in shaping myths? Are intellectuals cut out only to stand by as helpless witnesses when a disastrous mythology takes possession of their fellow citizens (as in Nazi Germany)?

While searching for an embracing and profound definition of myth as it operates today—one that would include the meaning implicit in the above queries as well as other meanings—I luckily recalled the memorable passage from Mark Schorer's *William Blake*, which is reprinted in this issue under "Texts and Motifs." I suggest that you read it at this point.

According to Mark Schorer: (i) a myth is "a large, controlling image" founded in man's experience (not a concept abstracted and detached from all sensible referents); (ii) not false by definition, it may be as "true" as it can be; (iii) it is not anti-intellectual, not "the negative nor the contrary of ideas, but their basis and their structure"; (iv) mythic images are the elements, however submerged, by which thought is sustained and propelled, and by means of which ideas—those systems of abstractions, for example, that we call ideologies—activate behavior; (v) our own civilization "seems to be struggling

* See "A Colloquy on the Unity of Learning," *Dædalus*, Vol. 87, No. 4 (1958), pp. 155-165.

toward a myth that will be explicitly ethical, even political." Thus "myth," as Mr. Schorer uses it, is a term that may refer not only, as always, to the viable, collective "dreams," sacred and secular, of primitive societies, but also to the emerging visions of modern men.

Although this definition, with its somewhat optimistic bent toward politics and ethics, appeared to be entirely consonant with the statements of the initiators of the enterprise—and hence can stand as roughly representative of their views—it did not happen to coincide with the interests and preferred meanings of most of those in the Cambridge-Boston area who generously accepted the invitation to take part in two preliminary and informal explorations of the field. In fact, after the surgical subtractions and additions of this early planning phase, short as it was, the original features of the subject matter were no longer visible. The proposed focus of attention was set aside and the sphere of concern expanded to include other times and other ways in which myths have operated, the pull from the past, from sheer literature, or from sheer science being obviously stronger than the valence of contemporary happenings, political or ideological. Here a largely influential force was the modesty of my colleagues, the reluctance of each to commit himself to an invasion of a forest of complexities without a substantial background of relevant meditation and of fitting special competence.

But what chiefly impeded the progress of our talk was the existence of vagueness and confusion as to the proper current referents of "myth," the existence, indeed, of such uncertainty and dissonance that our conjoined efforts proved incapable of building a sufficient base for semantic unanimity. Reading and conversation having led me to believe that this degree of vague uncertainty—even of blunt aversion in some instances—in regard to most modern usages of the word "myth" was by no means particular to us, I am planning, for the information of the participants of later phases of the symposium, to devote the remaining pages of this prelude to a résumé of our major doubts and differences, with some attention also to an island of supposed tentative agreement.

Mr. Schorer affirmed in 1946 that the definition of myth "must be both broad and loose, for myth operates universally and diversely." But in the judgment of most of us, the broadness and the looseness of recent usage—particularly since 1946 in literary circles—had gone so far as to deprive the term of any cognitive utility. Had it not come to mean almost any product of the imagination and hence

nothing distinguishable from other things, since the imagination, as we now realize, is involved in all but the simplest sensations? It seemed that "myth," liberated a few decades ago from its ancestral habitation, had become a semantic wanderer or hobo, a casual boarder or adulated visitor in many different mansions, and had shown no willingness as yet to stay formally put in any single residence. Under these circumstances, how could all of us understand what each of us in turn might say? Would it not be necessary to assign the term some place or places, as unambiguous as possible, at least for the duration of the proposed symposium? The question was: what place? In our perplexity we turned to Harry Levin and implored him to take this burden from us. He finally consented, and now happily we have "Some Meanings of Myth" published in this issue for our instruction and enjoyment.

But since that essay was not written in time to guide our rambling discussions, I undertook to juxtapose some prosaic wooden sentences as a possible temporary stead for intelligible discourse. The following were among them: according to the simplest, widely accepted definition—which conforms with ancient Greek usage—a myth is a spoken or written narrative, or story, with certain distinguishable qualities and properties. Here "myth" points to words as vehicles of transmission, but not to words per se, since the same myth can be told in different words. "Myth," then, must refer to the event, or interaction, that is described in words, and this is typically a critical event in which important beings or personified forces are involved, an event with some humanly consequential *thema* (plot, or dynamic structure). "Myth," however, does not refer to any actual perceptible event as such: the mythic event that is described in words consists of a procession of images in the storyteller's head, that is, it is an *imagined* event (or *imagent*), one that may be partly or wholly visionary, like a dream or hallucination, or one that may replicate quite closely the essential features of some observed overt occurrence. An imagent with a basically important structure (*myth*) may be represented to others not only in imageful and dramatic sentences (*mythic narrative*), but in quasi actions as in a ritual or drama (*mythic enactment*). Also, one or more episodes of the imagent may be represented in some durable medium, as in painting or sculpture (*mythic portrayal*). Finally, an imagent may motivate actual overt behavior (*mythic execution*). According to this definition "myth" points to something that resides in minds—in the minds of its com-

posers, transmitters, receptors, conservers, recomposers—rather than in books, to an imagined event or series of events rather than to a single, stationary “large controlling image,” in Schorer’s phrase. A controlling image (e.g., crucifix), however, may be all that is required to bring to mind the entire mythic serial in which it is imbedded. In summary, then, the following formal or qualitative definition seems warranted: myth is a sensible and dramatic representation of a supposedly recurrent or unique event (in the past, the present, or the future), an event with an important thema, which is represented primarily in the mind (imaginal myth), but secondarily in words (narrated myth), in quasi actions (enacted myth), or in some artistic form (portrayed myth).

In most cases, one is dealing not with a single event but with a series of events (*serial myth*), the component units of which may be called sub-myths, or sub-sub-myths. A more or less coherent assemblage of myths and serial myths constitutes a *mythology*. *Archetypal* characters, figures, symbols, situations, themas, outcomes are those with a long temporal span and a large spatial scope in the imaginations of men. One might say that such archetypes are *mythic genes*, being very stable down the centuries and yet susceptible under certain conditions to mutual attraction, composition, decomposition, and recomposition. A myth or a mythology in process of formation is marked by representations of unintegrated mythic genes (e.g., large controlling images) in conjunction with novel elements or features.

A necessary supplement to all this would be a functional definition of myth, one that describes its characteristic properties, the ways in which it has affected or now affects susceptible receptors. A myth is a *potent imagent*. Among its various potencies or properties the following should probably be included. (a) The sensible mythic representation is *peculiarly attractive* in one way or another (vivid, impressive, spectacular, beautiful, enchanting, marvelous, mysterious), leaves a durable and recurrent imprint in many minds, and is often reproduced in different narrated, enacted, or portrayed versions (*cynosural function*). (b) It *evokes empathy* (corresponding feeling) or recipathy (reciprocal feeling) and binds positive affection (admiration, awe, adoration, fellow feeling, love, compassion) over a considerable period of time (*affective function*). (c) It *elicits belief* in its essential validity or authenticity, or faith in its occurrence in the future (*cognitive function*). (d) It *guides conduct* by portraying one or more basic human needs, their goal, the actions they propel,

and the disastrous or successful outcome of these actions. If the aim or action of the hero is extravagant, vainglorious, reprehensible, or immoral and its outcome tragic, the story produces an empathic discharge and subsequent reduction of similarly unacceptable dispositions in susceptible receptors (*cathartic and deterrent function*). But if the aim and action of the hero or heroic group is admirable and the outcome happy (or maybe tragic), the story serves to initiate, orient, encourage, sustain, and ordinate comparable behavior (*eductive function*). This last is most applicable to *exemplar myths*, individual or social. (e) It produces all these effects to a sufficient degree in a large number of people—members of the same group, society, or religion—and thereby *brings about whole-hearted cooperative participation* in the execution of an important endeavor or ceremony (*consensual function*).

The potency of a myth is measurable, then, in terms of (i) the extent to which each of these functions is fulfilled (especially the eductive function), (ii) the number of people who are affected and possessed by it, and (iii) the duration of its influence. A super-ordinate mythology or myth is one that portrays the highest unifying goal or vision of an individual or of a collectivity, and as such is *sacred* to those of its adherents who are capable of reverence and dedication.

An emergent myth, or novel combination of mythic genes, must once have had its genesis in a single mind or in a few minds almost simultaneously (in the distant or more recent past); but it is not termed a myth until, after a largely unconscious formative period of varying duration, it has invaded numerous other minds and proved its potency by being widely represented in spoken or written words as well as in an ample iconography. A large number of once potent myths have either, we may assume, been relegated to oblivion or become inert, though still preserved as interesting antiquities.

Although my attempted clarification—of which the above paragraphs constitute a partial abstract—was at no point definitely refuted by my colleagues and hence might serve as a little blueprint of the probable area of consensus, it failed to define “humanly consequential thema” and hence to discriminate a mythic imagent or story from a non-mythic imagent or story; and it failed to distinguish with sufficient precision the various kinds of myths—past-oriented and future-oriented, cognitive and conative, perennial and apocalyptic, sacred and secular, individual and social, extravert and introvert,

literal and symbolic, et cetera, et cetera. Furthermore, it failed to come to grips with such recurrent questions as the following:

1. *Are there any potent myths today?* As stated earlier, the original assumption was that the emotions, thoughts, and actions of numberless modern men are moved by myths, that "we live in an intricacy of new and local mythologies, political, economic, poetic, which are asserted with an ever-enlarging incoherence" (Wallace Stevens), and that "wars may be described as the clash of mythologies" (Schorer). But at least one of us argued that "myth" should be restricted to its traditional meaning: a narrative about supernatural beings and occurrences, composed and transmitted by primitive peoples, which is no longer credible and hence no longer influential. Stories of this sort come from an early and long since outgrown phase of man's mental development (Comte's *l'état mystique*). Modern civilized man, having graduated from *l'état philosophique* and arrived at *l'état positif*, is without myths. "Modern myth" is a contradiction in terms.

In response to this judgment no one asked: how far back in Western history or prehistory does one have to go to find mythopoeic minds in action? Is it improper, for example, to speak of the Tristan and Isolde myth? the myths of witchcraft? the Faust myth? the Superman myth? Is it in fact true that the great majority of modern men and women have reached *l'état positif*? children? child-minded adults? such psychopaths as Hitler?

Although there was pretty general disagreement with the view that nobody is moved by myths today, several were bent to the conviction that rational men do not or should not require myths as guides in the conduct of their lives.

2. *Are myths essentially true or false?* It was generally agreed that a myth is the representation of an event that *purports to be true*, that the original Greek meaning of the word (*mythos*) was a "tale uttered by the mouth" in conjunction with a religious ceremony, a tale that was intended to convey an impressive and compelling revelation of the sacred, an *hierophany*, as Eliade has called it. But, some of us maintained, all such tales, whether sacred or secular, are now known to be delusory. To be sure, there are people of our own time who ardently believe in the validity of analogous products of the imagination (e.g., Fascists, Communists), but these more recent myths are all equally false, and, in some cases, deliberate fabrications to ensnare the masses.

In opposition to this opinion it was argued that the invalidation of countless past and current myths (or, for that matter, of countless past and current scientific theories) is not sufficient reason for asserting that *all* myths (or *all* theories) are false. It was pointed out that the linkage of "myth" (the sacred truth of pagans) with "falsehood," as well as the linkage of "gospel" with "truth," was hammered in by generations of Christian writers for reasons that are quite obvious. In short, "myth" became a prejudicial term to be applied to the beliefs of men with whom we disagree, never to our own beliefs. Consequently, those in whose minds this old and rusted linkage still persists are set to find more repulsion than attraction in the idea that our civilization "seems to be struggling towards a myth" (Schorer).

Quite a different stand was taken by the participant who favored the inclusion of the "truest" scientific models and theories as a special class of myths. He called attention to the fact that for three decades or more scientists have been regarding their most valid concepts of imperceptible entities as well as their best-confirmed theorems less as objects or laws of nature than as creations of the mind, working fictions, or convenient "myths," the diction of their representation being, in many cases, inevitably metaphorical (pictorial or thematic). This view was advanced largely in behalf of an absorbing interest in the similarities between the mental processes of poets and of scientists at their creative best. Both are mythmakers.

But why, others asked, should we obliterate the basic differences between scientific and artistic aims and products? Since science has an abundance of sufficient terms, such as "theory" and "model," what advantage is gained by introducing "myth," a term with other, more ambiguous connotations, as a synonym for these? Does not this usage deprive the poet of a word that distinguishes his unique function—say, to express emotion and excite the aesthetic imagination—and draw him into the cognitive orbit of the scientist? Furthermore, have not anthropologists pretty much abandoned the once prevalent idea that ancient myths are primitive theories primarily designed to appease man's elementary curiosity about the workings of nature? Is not one of the major functions of myth to provide an iconography for the orientation and ordering of activity rather than an abstract formulation for intellectual contemplation? Finally, are not all traditional myths characterized by an animistic humanization of nature in marked contrast to the scientist's inanimistic dehumanization, even of human nature?

In any case, if it were decided that every scientific theory of formulation per se could legitimately be assigned to a special class of myths, this usage of the term would have to be distinguished from "myth" as an emotionally influential image or submerged thematic fantasy in the mind of a scientist, derived not so much from his detached, impartial observations of selected phenomena of nature as from some other different source, such as an infantile complex, a passionate adolescent taste, his present state of being, the ethos of his era, a political or religious faith. For example, it has often been noted (not only in Nazi Germany and in Communist countries) that a theorist's target of interest, the way he defines the problem to be solved, the hypothesis he adopts, or even the conclusion that he reaches has been predetermined, to a greater or less extent, by an unconscious or half-conscious "mythic" factor, in the usual sense. Take, for example, Pauli's revealing accounts of the operation of a religious component in Kepler's speculations. In our day such an influence is naturally more evident among historians, social scientists, and psychoanalysts, but it is not limited to members of these disciplines.

3. *Generally speaking, are myths more harmful than beneficent?* As stated here, the question is pretty nearly meaningless and hence, let us suppose, was never raised explicitly. But, still, a general bent either to say No or to say Yes, either to look up to myths or to look down on them, was evident in most of us. A man who affirms that a valid scientific theory is virtually a myth, or that the most enduring literature has a basic mythic structure, or that he himself derives his greatest joy from a myth proceeding secretly within, or that the ideal of freedom is sustained by myths, or that the vision of making this world safe for democracy is an integral part of a mythology—an American who will cleave to any one of these assertions is likely to look up to myths, provided, say, they are composed of the substance that he values. More often, however, the term points solely to the disliked beliefs of others, and a man settles down with the conviction that myths are false—false science, false history, false psychology, or false prophecy—and so looks down on them, regardless of the heartening or consoling power they might exercise (e.g., the Second Coming).

But those of us who thought that our function was first and foremost to combat myths—to cancel or reduce their sway over the minds of men by exposure, analysis, criticism, or mockery—had principally in mind the extreme destructiveness in our time of certain social myths. In this connection the reader might be well advised to brood

over the passages of Sorel's notorious *Reflections on Violence* as well as the excerpt from *Doctor Faustus* (also reprinted in this issue under "Texts and Motifs") in which Thomas Mann in blood-curdling sentences describes the capitulation of some German intellectuals to the feverish and ferocious mystique of Nazism.

With so recent an example of nihilistic violence and catastrophe still vividly in view, there were naturally many references to the harm and few references to the good of which myths are capable—a ratio that can be taken as a rough index of the prevailing trend of sentiment among the planners.

4. *Are introvertive individual myths more deserving of our attention than myths of other classes?* This is another value-touching question that was never asked explicitly. And yet a generally negative answer to it might fairly be inferred on the basis of our talk, pretty nearly all of which was related to extravertive myths, myths that are descriptive of or oriented toward perceptible events in the environment, particularly social interactions in the imagined past or future. Oddly enough, there were few, if any, references to such extravertive individual myths as the myth of the hero, the economic success myth, the myth of the new Soviet man. It was to set forth this focus in a notable form that we have selected for reprinting under "Texts and Motifs" some telling paragraphs from Thomas Mann's famous speech on "Freud and the Future."

As it happened, only one or two of us were drawn to the topic of introvertive individual myths, that is, myths that symbolically portray important intrapsychic happenings: consequential subjective experiences, states of being and becoming, mutations of emotion and evaluation, interior conflicts and their resolutions. Poetic, mythic diction is not only the most natural and satisfying mode of representing and recording experiences of this sort, it is the only verbal means of educing through empathy comparable experiences in other suitably receptive persons. The theme of this class of myths is an abstract of countless personal experiences, set forth in concrete figurative language, all of which, though necessarily both private and unique, are similar in certain significant respects, and thus common to a large number of self-conscious persons, generation after generation. In the last analysis, myths of this kind may be said to tend toward emotional and evaluational unanimity, toward shared subjective states and shared subjective knowledge through internal transformations. In contrast, science might be said to tend toward perceptual

and conceptual unanimity, toward shared impartiality and shared objective knowledge through experimental manipulations of the environment. Mythic stories that depict the "night journey" of the soul, the encounter with the monster in each man's depths, liberation from imprisoning modes of feeling and of thought, spiritual rebirth, and so forth, are expressed in language that must be taken figuratively, symbolically, and imaginatively. Though the imagery is necessarily derived from the external world, the reference is internal. In no other way, as Plato insisted, can certain profound truths be genuinely conveyed to others.

Advocates of this view were thinking of the class of myths that were first generated and elaborated with the greatest subtlety in India. There the solitary ascetic was inevitably more engaged in heroic encounters with his instincts—grown monstrous through perpetual frustration—than he was in dealing with the monsters of whatever environment he had deserted. This seclusive, inward, concentrated, private, and spiritual Hindu orientation may be seen as the direct antithesis of the gregarious, outward, expansive, public, and material orientation of contemporary Soviet Russians as well as of Westerners generally, especially North Americans. It is Jung more than anyone perhaps who has worked with distinct success toward a synthesis of these opposites by applying Indian mythic images, modes of thought, and wisdom in modified forms to the dilemmas of Western man. One of his present theses, for example, is that our real enemies are within us—a horde of frantically ambitious and destructive dispositions—and our prime obligation is to cope with them at their source rather than to project them into our ideological opponents.

With this particular symposium in mind, however, one might reasonably ask: how many American intellectuals know enough about myths of this class (descriptive of inner states and transformations) to add to expert understanding of their nature, significance, determinants, or consequences? Fortunately we can boast of Mr. Campbell and the presence between these covers of his superb essay, "The Historical Development of Mythology."

Such were some of the contrasting viewpoints of the planners of this symposium, considerably distorted without doubt by some notions of my own, a defective memory, and a few unruly prejudices. Inevitably the emphasis has been on the negative, the reductive, the critical, the pessimistic, the mythoclastic judgments. But even had

I placed all that was positive in the foreground there could have been no enjoyment of immunity from the scorn of so passionate a mythmaker as William Blake, who proclaims that "Negation is the Spectre, the Reasoning Power in Man," and that he, the poet, has come "To bathe in the Waters of Life, to wash off the Not Human. . . . To cast off Rational Demonstration by Faith in the Saviour, To cast off the rotten rags of Memory by Inspiration, To cast off Bacon, Locke & Newton from Albion's covering, To take off his filthy garments & Clothe him with Imagination. . . . To cast off the idiot Questioner who is always questioning But never capable of answering. . . . Who publishes doubt & calls it knowledge, whose Science is Despair."